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THE ROYAL FIGURINE (?)
FROM TELL EL-FARKHA*

During the expedition to Tell el-Farkha organized from February to May 2006, the Early Dynastic deposit placed in a small jar has been discovered. It consists of 62 miniature objects made of hippopotamus tusk, faience, stone and bones. The most common are figurines of men, women and children, dwarfs of both sexes, fantastic creatures and animals¹.

A small figurine made of hippopotamus tusk showing a standing man who is wearing a knee-length coat seems very interesting (Fig. 1). The 7,5 cm high object is well preserved. Its right hand is bent in elbow. It just out from the coat and holds an unknown object. The pattern of the coat is striped. The man is presented with shoulder length hair or a wig. His face is round, he has got a beard and bulging eyes in a shape of almonds. His mouth is thin, a lower lip wide and nose as well ears are clearly marked. The person is shown in motion with the left put forward leg.

The figurine found in Abydos which is made of ivory bears much resemblance to the object from Tell el-Farkha. It shows a ruler from the 1st Dynasty wearing the crown of Upper Egypt and the *sed* festival coat. The rhomboidal pattern of the coat is interesting, however, as it is decorated with a braided

* Tell el-Farkha is believed to be one of the earliest historical sites in Egypt. This region of the Eastern Nile Delta has grown in popularity recently. The research directed since 1998 by K.M. Ciałowicz and M. Chłodnicki has been carried by the Institute of Archaeology of Jagiellonian University and Poznań Archeological Museum. It has been done in cooperation with Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of Warsaw University.

¹ K.M. Ciałowicz, *From Residence to Early Temple: the Case of Tell El-Farkha* [in:] *Archaeology of Early Northeastern Africa*, Studies in African Archaeology 9, Poznań 2006, 929.



1. The figurine from Tell el-Farkha. Hippopotamus tusk, height 7,5 cm.
Cairo, Egyptian Museum. Phot. Robert Słaboński

ornament². The right hand is bent in elbow, moves out from the coat and it probably holds a whip. The lower part of the figurine did not survive to our times but it is possible to assume that it showed a ruler in motion. The position of the body attracts attention. The man is shown when he bends his head which gives an impression of very tired, stooping king. Furthermore, the picture refers to the *sed* festival tradition which must have been celebrated during the thirtieth anniversary of king's reign³.

Looking closely at figurine from Tell el-Farkha we can also notice some similarities which are especially visible in his appearance and haircut to the limestone figurine discovered in Hierakonpolis, dates back to the Archaic Period and it is linked with the *sed* festival tradition⁴. The representations of the king during *sed* celebrations are also known from other Early Dynastic and even earliest objects. The Gebelein Painted Textile is one of the oldest examples. One of its preserved fragments shows the procession of boats. It also includes elements similar to the later pharaonic iconography such as: a man sitting on the throne and a kneeling figure with hands tied on his back and a macehead hanging under his head. The presence of these motives in such an early period is surprising and may suggest the existence of leaders being in authority over groups or territories at that time. The sitting man is wearing a robe very similar to that used during later *sed* celebrations. It makes us believe that these elements are very similar to the royal jubilee.

The Hierakonpolis Painting from the grave nr 100 seems to be the next important object which includes the elements related with the *sed* ritual. The whole painting may be connected with one of the local leaders or even early kings. The scenes placed in upper part of decoration refer to *sed* ceremony. The construction placed on the biggest boat is characteristic of *sed* festival and known also from other, later objects: the Narmer Macehead and Den Label from Abydos (see below). The earliest example of this construction is known from the discussed artifact. The running figure clearly inside the construction can be connected with the *heb sed* tradition.

The representations of the king during the *sed* festival are also known from the reliefs. The Narmer Macehead related with *sed* ceremony is a very good

² W.M.F. Petrie, *Abydos II*, London 1903, 24, pl 2,3; W.S. Smith, *A history of Egyptian Sculpture and Painting in the Old Kingdom*, Oxford 1949, fig 6; K.M. Ciałowicz, *Początki cywilizacji egipskiej*, Warszawa – Kraków 1999, fig. 220.

³ K. M. Ciałowicz, *Początki cywilizacji...*, 380

⁴ Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, <http://petrie.ucl.ac.uk>, cat.no. UC14878; B. Adams, *Ancient Hierakonpolis*, Warminster 1974, pl. 8; M. Rice, *Egypt's Making. The Origins of Ancient Egypt, 5000-2000 B.C.*, London - New York 1990, fig. 47; K. M. Ciałowicz, *Początki cywilizacji...*, fig. 228.

example. The single elements connected with *heb sed* are clear. A sitting figure is wearing a coat which is clinging to his body. Without doubt the most important elements are the boundary signs between which the royal, ritual run took place⁵.

The partly preserved Royal Mace Head is the next very important object showing the king during the *sed* festival⁶. The decoration of the artifact is in a very bad condition. On the left side the man wearing a typical *heb sed* coat and sitting in the kiosk is visible. Moreover, the construction of the kiosk refers to similar objects related with *sed* festival.

Also from the times of the First Dynasty the small votive label connected with a reign of Den and found in Abydos have been preserved. The decoration of mentioned label is also related with the discussed festival. In the upper level two episodes of the *sed* festival have been showed: the king sitting in the kiosk with a whip in his hand as well as king running between signs completed from three crescent moons each. In both scenes king is wearing coat which is clinging to his body and a double crown. The inscription should be read out from the right to the left side. At first the king is carrying out the ritual run holding emblems of reign in his hands and after that he is sitting on the throne as a king of Upper and Lower Egypt. The inscription implies clearly that the *sed* festival was a ritual connected with physical regenerating during which by running around the royal residence the king proves that he is still capable of reigning over his country⁷.

Many other objects such as fragments of relieves, pottery paintings and fragmentary preserved figurines are known and related with the Late Predynastic and Archaic periods. They suggest the very early origins of *heb sed* traditions and their relations with particular rulers⁸. The main aim of the *sed* celebration was to confirm physical ability of the king which gave him the right to reign.

The *sed* festival was undoubtedly accepted as a one of the most important and most distinguished royal ceremonies. Its origins are strongly rooted in Predynastic times and pastoral cultures. Also the frequency and a number of *heb sed* images seems to be a confirmation of the very important role of the festival

⁵ C.J. Bleeker, *Egyptian Festivals* [Studies in the History of Religion XIII], Leiden 1967, 99; Vandier J., *Manuel d'archéologie égyptienne I*, Paris 1952, 602.

⁶ E. Baumgartel, *The Cultures of Prehistoric Egypt II*, London 1960, 116; J. Quibell, *Hierakonpolis I*, London 1900, 8.

⁷ F.D. Friedman, *The Underground Relief Panels of King Djoser at the Step Pyramid Complex*, JARCE 32, 7-8, 1995.

⁸ E. Hornung, E. Staehelin, *Neue Studien zum Sedfest*, Aegyptiaca Helvetica 20, Basel 2006, 12-15.

during the king's reign⁹. Not even one complete picture of this celebration survived but only numerous fragmentary information from paintings and inscriptions¹⁰. Particular rituals of the *sed* festival known from the images are very difficult to define and a lot of our theories are still in hypothetic sphere¹¹. Using available sources many authors have tried to reconstruct the exact course of the rituals as well as genesis of the festival and even the meaning of the *heb sed* term¹².

On the basis of materials discussed and analysed above we may assume that the figurine from Tell el-Farkha might have showed a ruler during such a ceremony. Those conclusions are rooted in the king's apparel as it is similar to the Early Dynastic representations that were discussed above. Another fundamental fact is that the *sed* ritual was held only by rulers and we may presume the figurine showed one of the early Egyptian kings.

We cannot ascertain the facts which ruler it shows. However, according to the date of the evidence dating back to the first half of I Dynasty we may suppose that it was one of the kings from that particular dynasty or even from Dynasty 0. We may believe that until now the figurine from Tell el-Farkha is the first evidence of the *heb sed* tradition.

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⁹ H. Sourouzian, *Inventaire iconographique des statues en manteau jubilaire de l'époque thinite jusqu'à leur disparition sous Amenhotep III*, In: *Hommages à Jean Leclant*, vol 1, Cairo 1994, 499-530; C.J. Bleeker, *Egyptian Festivals...*, 91; E. Hornung, E. Staehelin, *Studien zum Sedfest*, *Aegyptiaca Helvetica* 1, Genève 1974.

¹⁰ J. Gohary, *Akhenaten's Sed – Festival at Karnak*, *Studies in Egyptology*, London 1992, 1.

¹¹ T.A.H. Wilkinson, *Early Dynastic Egypt*, London – New York 1999, 210 – 212.

¹² C.J. Bleeker, *Egyptian Festivals...*, 91; E. Hornung, E. Staehelin, *Studien zum Sedfest*, *Aegyptiaca Helvetica* 1, Genève 1974, 91 – 94; J. Gohary, *Akhenaten's Sed-Festival...*, 1; T. DuQuesne, *The Jackal Divinities of Egypt*, t.I, *From the Archaic Period to Dynasty X*, London 1995, 272; J. Kamil, *The Ancient Egyptians. Life in the Old Kingdom*, Cairo 1996, 47.

